

ART AND THE BOXOFFICE

Drawings by Hy Mayer

BY LEE SHUBERT

THEY delight in calling us "commercial" managers! If we are commercial managers, what would be the fate of an "art" manager? Would he be expected to produce all the plays of a thousand unrecognized geniuses? Would he be expected to make stars out of all the actors and actresses that the public decides it does not care to patronize in stellar roles? Would he be expected to do his work in a velvet-draped studio, instead of in an office, and would the walls of his place of business have to be decorated with college diplomas?

It is difficult for us to conquer in the struggle for the survival not only of the fittest, but of the wisest. Where would the art manager be at the end of his first season—if he ever managed to begin a regular season at all?

Nobody thinks it at all out of the way that publishers, booksellers, and art dealers should be men of affairs. But the theatrical manager is ridiculed because he takes all the precautions possible to conserve his property and make some money in an essentially speculative business.

The manager is really the most uncommercial of men, the man so obsessed by his interest in plays and players that he takes continual chances in a form of enterprise that any truly commercial man would reject at a glance.

The aim of this article is not to attack those whose genius and cooperation are as essential to the theater as the activity of the manager himself, but simply to throw a new light on the situation and to make an argument for fair play. The ones who are truly commercial are the actors and the authors. These have got their commercialism down to a science, no matter how much they talk of their art and how much real art they may be responsible for. They take no chances. They play the game only to win and never to lose—which is real commercialism.

However rich the actor may be, he will generally refuse any risk to exploit himself; for he knows just how great the risk is, and has not enough confidence in himself to take the plunge. Yet the manager is taking risks for him—all the time!

Authors are much the same in this respect; although there are a dozen millionaires among them. They will seldom take the chance of producing their own plays; for they also lack confidence when it comes to spending their own money. The actor as well as the author undertakes to excuse himself to the managers by pretending to be modest, by asserting that he does not sufficiently understand the business. But he actually knows every inch of the business, and knows it better than anybody else. He will take no chances on himself or his wares. That is why there are ten times more rich actors and authors than rich managers.

EVIDENTLY the public does not appreciate the fact that actors and authors may grow rich on productions that leave a manager in debt. But such is the case. So long as the production continues, the actor gets his salary, regardless of the income at the boxoffice, and the author gets his percentage of the gross—and not of the net! If a drama by some noted author plays to a gross business of seven thousand dollars a week in New York City, and this author—being a noted man—is getting the high royalty of ten per cent., the result will be as follows: The manager of the theater will get thirty-five hundred dollars, half of the gross, and the producing manager will get the other thirty-five hundred; but out of his share the producing manager will have to pay the author seven hundred dollars, or ten per cent. of the total. In other words, the producing manager pays the royalty without the aid of the theater manager at all; but that royalty is based on the income of both house and company. After paying this royalty the producing manager will have just twenty-eight hundred dollars left, which would be decidedly insufficient to meet the payroll of a first-class company, together with such expenses as advertising, billing, printing, orchestra, and managerial staff.

Another point must be considered. The producing manager doesn't begin to make any real profit until he has amassed sufficient profit to repay all the original charge of building the production and rehearsing the company. Many a one with a near-success on his hands has gone through a whole season without even expecting to clear an eventual profit, but clinging to the hope that, before warm weather comes, he will have got back his initial outlay without having lost any money.

It is true that some actors take their pay partly in salary and partly in the form of sharing the profit.



"Would he be expected to do his work in a velvet-draped studio?"

But these are only a few stars of established drawing power, and the salary, without the interest in the profit, makes an income larger than that enjoyed by the heads of many large corporations. That share is not so much pay as bonus, and the fact that the actor gets it is due more to the judgment of the manager than to the art of the star.

That the judgment of the manager is in most cases more important to the success of a play than anything the star can contribute is shown by the selection of the play itself. In instances too numerous to mention we have had the players continuously and unmercifully condemn in advance the very pieces in which they made their greatest successes. Even at the dress rehearsals, the leading actors and actresses frequently declare that the play is hopeless and is sure to fail. The judgment of the manager is by no means infallible; but compared with the judgment of the actor it is fine and discriminating!

Clearly there is a great difference between the risk taken by the theater manager and that taken by the producing manager. The man who confines his activity to the leasing and operating of playhouses is not taking any big chances if he has good real estate judgment in selecting locations, sound sense in building his structures, and sufficient insight into the intricacies of the business to get average good attractions booked at his theaters. The wholly speculative end of any theatrical venture is the producing and managing of the attraction; for, if the production is a failure, practically the entire investment is a loss. The producer of a legitimate theatrical enterprise indulges in speculation to a far greater extent than any other theatrical manager. The vaudeville man and the picture house man need have but little energy, foresight, or money. Their houses are all conducted on much the same plan, and they have become rich by simply establishing a theater in a suitable locality and opening the doors. Whereas the legitimate producing manager has to manufacture his own product, the vaudeville manager gets his acts ready made and merely takes the place of an exhibitor.

Is it the commercial instinct that prompts the manager to put from ten thousand to fifty thousand dollars into any undertaking that, if unsuccessful, will be a total loss? Or is it an ambition not altogether unlike the ambition of the genuine artist who devotes himself to a certain field of work because he is impelled to do so and finds in it the inspiration he craves?

It is argued that the profits of one success are great enough to offset several failures. This is true—to a degree. But the real hits are only a small proportion of the total of productions. And they do not come at such regular intervals that financial arrangements can be based upon them. It would be fine if successes were like railroad stations and came every so often! We should then laugh at our troubles in the confidence of having a hit the week after next.

The most fearful thing against which the theatrical producer must contend in innumerable forms and shapes is "art": not that genuine art which is bashful, timorous, and never vain, but that irrepressible "near-art" which spells art with a capital A. If I say a few frank words about such "art" and

such "artists," it must be understood that my remarks are aimed at only those who deserve such treatment, and not against the many fine men and women whose honest work and loyalty make up the very backbone of the theater. But art,—not for the sake of art, nor for the sake of what it truly merits,—art for the sake of the job and the publicity, ought to get thoroughly exposed for once and all.

The greatest of all problems confronting the producing manager is that his entire product is based on the kind of real or imitation art that can at any moment walk out of the stage door and refuse to continue. It is not the kind of art that can be put into the black and white of paper and printer's ink, nor the art that can be fixed once and for all on a piece of canvas, cut in stone, or molded in bronze. It is just the art that lies for a few brief years in the body and brains of human beings who, by the very nature of their lives and labor, are more or less untrustworthy. In other words, it is not the art that "stays put."

Suppose that the purchaser of a valuable statue did not know at what moment that statue might come to life and walk over into some other gallery! Suppose that the manuscript of a popular novel could take wings after the payment of the advance royalty to the author and fly into the window of a rival publisher's office! Fancy the result if the picture of a beautiful woman was subject to fits of temperament that made it entirely unfit for exhibition!

THE Shubert enterprises will this season employ several thousands of persons, one thousand at the Hippodrome alone. The majority of these will be "artists," in the sense that they will receive salaries for appearing on the stage. A certain number of them will be in New York City, where it is always possible to deal with them directly; but more of them will be on the road at all points from Maine to California and from New Orleans to Vancouver. At least ninety-nine per cent. of them, including all classes and sorts, will have "temperaments," and many of them will have a profound belief that the manager is a person to whom



"Where there is one real artist there are a dozen pretenders."